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ABSTRACT

The make-up of a course in African literature for high school students is discussed. It is pointed out that the course can be constructed on already familiar lines. High school students will be able to describe clearly, for example, the relationship between environment and character or the dilemma of characters caught between traditional values and those of the city. A course would include as an introduction the religion and literature of ancient Egypt, which would enable students to make countless correspondences between the clothing, religion, art and customs of ancient Egypt and West African, East African and Central African forms. Various literary titles are suggested for inclusion. (Author/CK)

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TITLE: ELECTIVE: AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Every high school English department that is determined to direct itself toward the new decade must devise courses of study built out of fresh materials and designed to be of value to all students. African literature as an elective course offers the American student an opportunity to learn principles of effective writing and to see another culture presented from the point of view of writers within that culture. The possibilities in an African literature elective are extraordinarily rich.

The course can be constructed on lines already familiar to the teacher of English and American literature. High school students of African literature will be able to describe clearly, for example, the relationship between environment and character or the dilemma of characters caught between traditional values and those of the city. Titles exist in all genres and are available in inexpensive paperback editions. African literature, moreover, admits easily to chronological and/or thematic and/or geographic units by increasingly available supplementary multi-media materials dealing with African history, music, art, aesthetics and current events. The religion and literature of ancient Egypt should be a first unit, enabling students to make countless correspondences between the clothing, religion , art and customs of ancient Egypt and West African, East African and Central African forms. The teacher must avoid dividing African literature into "North Africa" -- by which is often implied non-black Africa -- and "Sub-Saharan Africa -- by which is often implied black Africa.

[Quotation deleted here from Prince E. Wilson, "Black Men before the Civil War," Current History 57(November 1969), 339, pp. 257-58, for copyright reasons.]

And Basil Davidson, one of the leading European writers on African history, states the following:

> Herodotus saw the matter very clearly when travelling through Egypt not long after 450B.C., for he had no difficulty in concluding that Egypt's cultural origins lay in continental Africa. On the subject of circumcision, for example, he remarked that 'as between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians (by which he meant the peoples we call African), I should not like to say which learned from the other...', a remarkably up-to-date statement of the case. Here in this ancient community of cultures between the Atlantic and the Nile, one may indeed trace the ground-stratum of many obscure but persistent unities of thought and attitude among African peoples now living far apart and apparently in total isolation from each other. Thus it was not simple diffusion from Pharaonic Egypt, but still earlier diffusion from the Saharan-Sudanese community, which can probably explain why the ram and the python should be symbols of religion all round the Sahara and far beyond it, or why many related social attitudes and institutions should be present among widely separated African peoples.[2]

In an African literature course individual works can, of course, still be used to illustrate tradtional lessons in structure but these lessons will have the added value of bearing a fresh perspective. Mine Boy, an early novel (1946) by Peter Abrahams, a black South African, was one of the first books to draw attention to the lives of black South Africans in an absolutely white-dominated nation. The opening lines of the novel can be used by the teacher to illustrate the construction of setting, characterization, dialogue. In his brief first paragraph the author at once establishes setting and time through the perspective of Xuma, the protagonist.

> Somewhere in the distance a clock chimed. The big man listened. One...Two...Three...Three o'clock in the morning.
>
> He shifed the little bundle from his right hand to his left, hitched up his pants, and continued up the narrow street. A dark narrow street full of shadows, he thought. But then this whole Malay Camp is full of shadows.[3]

The second paragraph reaffirms the perspective of Xuma, shows him at once in action -- dominating the paragraph -- as he moves into the "narrow street." The tenebrous scene stated in the second and third sentence of the second paragraph is the African "settlement" and it is, indeed, a shadowy world leading one directly into the novel's delineation of the violence and desperation in race relations in South Africa.

Parallels may be drawn between the treatment of the indigenous South African population by the European immigrant and his descendents and the treatment of the indigenous Indian population by the European immigrant to America and by his descendents. Ernest Cole, exiled black South African author of House of Bondage, wrote the following:

> Retribution is swift for cheeky Kaffirs. But inside there is fire. You rise in the morning filled with sour thoughts of your poverty under the white economy. I remember days when I was so broke I could not afford the little gas I needed to go here or there to shoot pictures with the film I had nearly starved myself to buy. Whenever I could, I accepted invitations to the homes of white liberals for the food they offered -- until it stuck in my throat at the thought of how casually they could regard it, while at our house we wondered whether there would be porridge on the morrow.
>
> Wherever you go in South Africa oppression weighs upon you. There is never a day that your anger lacks for fuel. At its highest pitch you are shaken by its violence, and you feel you will go mad in the streets or commit murder.
>
> But you do not. You make your own contributions to repression by repressing anger. Among friends you do not even talk of the outrages you bear. It simply feeds the flames. So you smolder but you do not explode.[4]

And in his autobiography My People, the Sioux, American Indian Luther Standing Bear recalls the following:

> Our scouts, who had gone out to locate the buffalo, came back and reported that the plains were covered with dead bison. These had been shot by the white people. The Indians never were such wasteful, wanton killers of this noble game animal. We kept moving, fully expecting soon to run across plenty of live buffalo; but we were disappointed. I saw the bodies of hundreds of dead buffalo lying about, just wasting, and the odor was terrible.
>
> Now we began to see white people living in dugouts, just like wild bears, but without the long snout. These people were dirty. They had hair all over their faces, heads, arms, and hands. This was the first time many of us had ever seen white people, and they were very repulsive to us. ..
>
> Outside these dugouts we saw bale after bale of buffalo skins, all packed, ready for market. These people were taking away the source of the clothing and lodges that had been provided for us by our Creator, and they were letting our food lie on the plains to rot. They were to receive money for all this, while the Indians were to receive only abuse. We thought these people must be devils, for they had no sympathy. Do you think such treatment was fair to the Indian?[5]

A great many of the novels, biographies, short stories and plays in African literature have several advantages for the teacher of English. They offer moral dimensions, fascinating settings, cultural references and engaging themes. They have strong problems facing the protagonist, problems with which the American student can often identify. And many of the novels and biographies are short! And most of them have few of the lexical, syntactical and structural difficulties that could trouble the weaker reader. And they are legitimately relevant to Afro-Americans in search of African backgrounds and African thought. And, indeed, they are legitimately relevant to all Americans in search of African backgrounds and African thought.

A few of the many available titles suggested for inclusion in an African literature course could include the following:

BIOGRAPHY

Abrahams, Peter. Tell Freedom. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.

Kenyatta, Jomo. Facing Mt. Kenya. New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., ($1.45)

Nkrumah, Kwame. The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1957.

NOVEL

Abrahams, Peter. Mine Boy. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1968.

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. Connecticut: Fawcett Publications Inc., 1969. ($0.75)

Armah, Ayi Kwei. The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

Ekwensi, Cyprian. People of the City. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1968.

Ngugi, James. A Grain of Wheat. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1966.

PLAYS

Cook, David and Lee, Miles, eds. Short East African Plays in English. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1968.

Litto, Fredric M. ed. Plays from Black Africa. New York: Hill and Wang, 1969. ($1.95)

POETRY

Soyinka, Wole. Idanre and Other Poems. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. ($3.95)

Moore Gerald, and Beier, Ulli, eds. Modern Poetry from Africa. London: Penguin Books, 1963. ($0.95)

TRAVEL

Gorer, Geoffrey. Africa Dances. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1962. ($1.85)

Jahn, Janheinz. Through African Doors. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969. ($2.45)

Warner, Esther. Seven Days to Lomaland. New York: Pyramid Books, 1967. ($0.75)

FOOTNOTES

[1]Prince E. Wilson, "Black Men Before the Civil War," Current History, 57 (November, 1969), 339., pp. 257, 258. [See note below.]

[2]Basil Davidson, Africa: History of a Continent (New York, 1966), p.21.

[3]Peter Abrahams, Mine Boy (London,1963), p. 11.

[4]Ernest Cole, House of Bondage (New York, 1967), p. 21.

[5]Luther Standing Bear, My People the Sioux (New York, 1928), pp. 67, 68.

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